DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 062 352 TE 002 905

AUTHOR Hauck, Marian K.
TITLE The Case for Descriptive Writing.
PUB DATE [69]
NOTE 7p.; An unpublished paper

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Descriptive Writing; English Curriculum; Language Skills; Skill Development; *Student Developed Materials; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching descriptive writing and its values are discussed. Benefits derived from a descriptive writing unit are said to be the following: (1) Descriptive writing is fun; (2) It enables the instructor to demonstrate that the first word that pops into the writer's mind is often not the best one; (3) There is no easier way in which to teach grammar, especially parts of speech; (4) There is not better training in seeing the need for precise word selection and for developing this skill; (5) It aids the student in developing craftmanship in his writing. Practical application of these theories of value include: an image quiz; demonstration of conscious word selection using a step-by-step approach until a one sentence description is created; introduction of figures of speech and words that appeal to the senses; emphasis on reader involvement; introduction of the entire area of diction in connection with the consideration of what the reader will respond to and how he will respond. In writing the longer essay, the student should become an observer and note-taker; learn to organize or preplan his material; become knowledgable in the use of transitional devices; and become aware of the importance of tone and mood. (DB)

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Mrs. Marian K. Hauck
Portland Community College
Portland, Oregon

THE CASE FOR DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Three years ago an editorial in The Oregon Statesman entitled "Description from Space" lamented the fact that the astronauts used so little descriptive language while relating their impressions of the views of earth they received from their spacecrafts. "They tend to greet a new, spectacular view of earth with something like, 'Man, what a sight,' or'It certainly is beautiful.'" The writer went on to what now amounts to a prophesy of the verbal reactions of man's first visit to the moon: "What a disappointment if the first words to come back from the moon are, 'Man, this is great'" (Salem, Oregon, October 9, 1966). What Buzz Aldrin actually did say upon alighting from the Lem was, "Beautiful," followed by Neil Armstrong's "Isn't that something? It's a magnificent sight out here." It seems evident that the space officials did not heed the suggestion of the Statesman editorial, that some training in the art of description would be a good addition to the space program for astronauts. While most college composition classes do not contain many potential astronauts, the need for training in descriptive writing is still present. In fact, a well-developed approach to descriptive writing can furnish the instructor with a pleasant learning situation into which many aspects of writing can be readily introduced and receptively received by even the grudging English Composition student.

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The values of using descriptive writing as a tool to teach other aspects of composition are numerous. Many of the techniques include vital areas of understanding for the beginning writer, and others are adaptable to the needs of the advanced composition student who is in the process of developing a distinctive

style.

Most important, descriptive writing is fun. If there is anything a room full of indifferent and sometimes hostile composition students need in order to begin a session of writing, it is a project they might enjoy. Even the most non-believing young man can often find not only success but a degree of pleasure in describing his shining chariot so successfully and completely that the other fellows in the class envy him and the coeds sigh. As to more tangible values, attempts at describing familiar objects make a student more aware of his present vocabulary and the potential he already possessed to write successfully, most of which is not being used or developed. As he searches for a word to capture the steely blue sheen of his special car, he discovers he does have words to re-create his treasure. In search of that exact words the student can also be easily introduced to the thesaurus or synonym dictionary, thus giving him an opportunity to broaden his vocabulary.

A bigger word is not always a better word in a composition, but a more precise one is. The second major benefit of the descriptive unit is that it enables the instructor to demonstrate that the first word that pops into the writer's mind is often not the best one available to him. This point is easy for a student to see when he is describing an object, and the instructor can emphasize the importance of transfering this awareness of the need for precise word selection to all other forms of expression.

In addition, should the need be present, there is surely no easier and more understandable way in which to teach grammar, especially parts of speech, than through the practical vehicle of description. While the rules that a noun is the name of a person, place or thing, and an adjective is a word that limits that noun are theory, the <u>big black bear</u> is practical and easily grasped by a slower student. That a prepositional phrase further modifies or limits a noun is fine, but that it is a <u>big black bear with shaggy fur</u> is graphic and under-

standable. The possibilities for demonstrating principles of grammar are limited-ed only by the imagination of the instructor.

In advanced composition the two generally accepted aspects of writing which are of paramount importance in the developing of a style are diction and rhythm. There is no finer training for not only seeing the need for precise word selection but for continuing to develop this necessary skill than descriptive writing. Projects for the descriptive approach are readily available, and they can be increasingly challenging. Rhythm, too, can be a part of the advanced descriptive writing program.

The Advanced student who is beginning to concentrate on developing his style knows that while some of writing is inspiration, most of it is craftsmanship. The processes of developing a good descriptive essay or sketch demonstrate the techniques of the craft of precise, clear expression, applicable to the craft of good prose of all types. He can discover, additionally, that style is that magical blend of all "types" of writing; that exposition, description, narration and argumentation all become a part of his expression as he matures as a writer.

In practical application of these theories of value in the descriptive approach, one useful beginning is an image quiz. The instructor can mention a general noun or two, asking each student to briefly describe on paper the mental picture or image he has. Then several students can be asked to read their descriptions. If in response to cat a student reads, "a sleek, black tomcat with swinging tail," and the instructor replies that she was trying to have him visualize "a minute ball of grey fur, softly purring," it is obvious that she did not communicate successfully with cat. These simple examples illustrate immediately the need for specificness and preciseness not only in description but anytime one is trying to communicate successfully.

As the student begins to learn specific techniques for good descriptive writing, it is important to stress the need for conscious selection of each word,

rather than just rambling on. This emphasis tends to eliminate the use of words for the sake of words, a habit which can develop in beginning descriptive writing. In demonstrating conscious selection, one approach is to begin with a basic sentence such as The crowd went to the event. The nouns can each be changed to a more specific word, several times if necessary, to develop precision: crowd = group = mob. The verb should likewise be upgraded: went = ran = raced = surged. Adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, verbal phrases, all can be added gradually, until a full-blown one sentence description is created. Stressing this step-by-step approach is important in developing the habit of conscious selections of words. The ideas of consistent tone and mood can also be easily introduced here. It is obvious that an angry, milling mob will not be skipping merrily to a mid-summer picnic.

Of especial importance in most all types of writing, not just description, is involving the reader in the material. Involvment is natural in a good piece os description, and there are many techniques which can help achieve it. If the reader can visualize the scene or setting, he can participate in it. Figures of speech, especially the simile and the metaphor, can be introduced at this point (and cliches can also be discussed). Appeals to the senses are vital in good description and these are prime involvers. Words can be selected for their sound appeal, their appeal to the nose, the taste buds, the fingers or hands. If the reader is involved physically by an appeal to the senses, the chances of success in communicating are greater.

Another vital point to be emphasized to the student in connection with reader involvement: there is a reader. A writer, even a beginning composition student, must be aware that there is an audience out there towards whom he is directing himself and his efforts. If the descriptive writer is attempting to involve his reader, he is conscious that the reader exists. This awareness can give him purpose and direction, a reason for writing.

Beyond the student's awareness that there is an audience comes the consideration as to what that audience will respond to and how it will respond. Here, too, the tools of description are useful. The entire area of diction can be introduced: clarity of word choice, concreteness, appropriateness, denotation and connotation. Most all of the class will agree that they would rather be referred to as _average_ rather than _mediocre_, and the fellows understand that they will be more successful in dating if they refer to their girlfriends as _slim_ or _slender_, rather than _thin_, _skinny_ or _scrawny_. Thus are the essentials of connotation presented. Regarding precision and appropriateness, it seems obviously inappropriate to say, "The Queen recently gave birth to her third _kid_." The distinction between _boulders_, _gravel_ and _pebbles_ can serve to clarify and make more concrete the noun _rocks_. All these shades of meaning illustrate that the writer must pick the word that best fits the object or idea he has in mind or is visualizing, so that the audience towards whom he directs his writing can visualize the same object or idea. This consideration of who the audience is and how it will respond to a certain word, while perhaps most important in persuasion or argumentation, is necessary for any prose.

Once these basic tools of descriptive writing are understood and practiced, the student may be ready for a longer essay in which all the tools can be put to practical use: the description of a scene or of a person. In preparing for such an assignment, the student must first sharpen his powers of observation and of note taking so he has vivid material to use. In the description of a scene, the need for limits or in this case boundaries to the essay are apparent. And should the student try to sketch or diagram his scene, he will discover much about his scene and his description: if it is too large (an entire valley is difficult to sketch), too complex, too sparsely described. (Another excellent "test" of a good scene is to ask another student is sketch the scene after reading the essay.)

The need for peaks of interest or focus points (read key ideas for other forms of prose) is also evident in the assignment as the writer attempts a good visual scene. Organization or pre-planning of the material--often so difficult to have a student see the need for --becomes apparent from the sketch also, for the reader must be able to visualize the whole scene, moving easily and smoothly from one focus point to another. If the sketch shows that the description of the scene jumps from corner to corner, with no logical progression from focus to focus, the student can actually see that it will be difficult for his reader to mentally form a picture from the essay. The instructor can point out that this same smooth, easy-to follow organization is necessary for any essay, and that if the key ideas are not obvious the reader will not be able to follow the progression of ideas.

Transitions, too, are demonstrable here. Phrases such as across the stream, up around the bend, a few feet beyond the edge of the road are obvious transitional devices in the description of a scene. The transfer of the idea of the need for transtions between the key ideas can be stressed.

Finally, the importance of consistent tone and mood will be evident, especially if it is lacking. This is a readily accessible model for demonstrating his tone or mood can be destroyed if point of view or tense shifts occur, or if even one word is selected which violates the predominant mood.

In the character sketch or description of a person, many of the same opportunities are available for pointing out strengths and weaknesses in good writing. In addition the instructor can introduce, more easily than with the scene, the evidence in an essay of the attitude of the writer, through the positive or negative description of the character. The use of either objectivity or subjectivity by the writer can also be demonstrated with these character sketches. In all of these potential assignment areas, selected professional writing samples may be used at the descretion of the instructor as models or vehicles for demonstration of certain techniques.

Descriptive writing is often called creative writing, and is thus not included in many instructors' composition approach. Yet all writing is creative, in the sense that it is creating or producing a unified group of sentences and ideas designed to make a stand, support an idea or express an opinion. Descriptive writing is a logical vehicle through which the instructor can interestingly introduce the basic tools of writing, including good vocabulary, precise diction and sound organization. Perhaps most important of all values in the descriptive approach, however, is that the instructor can enable the student to begin to think of himself as a writer--one who purposefully sits down to try to communicate some idea to a reading audience--not as a student cranking out five hundred carefully counted words for a teacher who he thinks probably won't read them anyway.

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